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# Life Outcomes of Childless Men and Fathers

Renske Keizer, Pearl A. Dykstra and Anne-Rigt Poortman

Using data from the first wave of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS) for 1,451 men aged 40–59 we examine the impact of permanent childlessness. We extend on previous work by focusing on partnership history as a possible explanation for differences between childless men and fathers. Our results show that the impact of childlessness is weaker than we had expected. Many initial differences between childless men and fathers are attributable to differences in their partnership history. Nevertheless, childless men differ from resident fathers regarding their community involvement, their level of income and their satisfaction with life. Childless men differ from non-resident fathers with respect to their income and work hours. Theoretical and societal implications of our findings are discussed.

## Introduction

Being a parent is seen as at the core of having a normal adult life (Dykstra and Hagestad, 2007b). Research on childlessness has been coloured by this notion. In the literature, the childless are depicted as others, as deviants (Letherby, 2002). Such stereotypes are found in contemporary work, though they were more powerful a few decades ago. Moreover, the childless are seen as disadvantaged. It is typically assumed that the childless have weak or tenuous ties to others; that they are marginal in support networks, their neighbourhood and community and in society at large (Akerlof, 1998).

Given that being a parent is considered to be more central in the lives of women than in those of men (Veevers, 1980; Hird and Abshoff, 2000; Letherby, 2002; Bulcroft and Teachman, 2003), the ramifications of not having entered the parental role are generally assumed to be more disadvantageous for childless women than for childless men. As a consequence, most studies have examined the impact of childlessness for women and have neglected men (Greene and Biddlecom, 2000). This is an unfortunate omission in the literature, because it overlooks men's role in

families, which traditionally has been the good provider (Bernard, 1981; Becker, 1991). Recent studies have concluded that breadwinning is still an important component of men's fathering identity and men's main form of commitment to family life (Warin *et al.*, 1999; Christiansen and Palkovitz, 2001; Hatten, Vinter, and Williams, 2002). Without children, the enactment of this role becomes less relevant for men.

To reach an understanding of the impact of childlessness on men's life outcomes we focus on the ways in which fatherhood structures men's lives. By using life-course structuring as an overarching framework, we aim to uncover what it is about having children that matters in how well men fare.

Two views exist. Some scholars have argued that fatherhood has a lasting influence on men's lives (Snarey, 1993; Palkovitz, 2002). It transforms them: becoming a father is thought to lead to permanent changes with respect to men's behaviour and well-being. Others have suggested that the impact of fatherhood is quite restricted, structuring men's lives only to the extent that they actively occupy fathering roles (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006; Knoester and Eggebeen, 2006). To find out whether the childless

differ from fathers because they have not made the transition to fatherhood or because they are not actively involved with their children, we make comparisons between permanently childless men, resident, and non-resident fathers. We use co-residence as the indicator of active involvement.

Comparisons between these three groups are scarce. In the transition to parenthood literature, researchers put young men who might still make the transition to parenthood in the childless category. So, in these research designs, permanently childless men and 'not yet fathers' are not distinguished (Umberson and Gove, 1989; Eggebeen and Knoester, 2001; Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2003). Moreover, parenthood has empirically often been reduced to having children in the household; comparisons are made between adults living with children and those who have no children in their households [for reviews see (McLanahan and Adams, 1987; Kendig *et al.*, 2007)]. In such research designs, the childless are placed in the same category as are empty-nesters. As a result, life-long childlessness and no longer having children living at home are not distinguished.

An important consideration is that partnership history rather than parental status accounts for differences between childless men and fathers. The literature shows that especially men benefit from marriage (Waite, 1995; Nock, 1998). It may be the case that fathers are advantaged because they are more likely partnered in comparison to childless men. In previous studies, this question has only scarcely been addressed, because researchers have not disentangled effects of parenthood from effects of partnership history. Recent research on the impact of childlessness in old age has shown that parenthood differences were partly attributable to marital history; few effects of parenthood were found independent of marital history (Dykstra and Wagner, 2007; Kendig *et al.*, 2007; Wenger *et al.*, 2007).

In this article we want to improve upon previous research, and more specifically to reach an understanding of why childless men might differ from fathers. To do so, we compare permanently childless men with resident and non-resident fathers and we explicitly take men's partnership history into account. As studies on the impact of parenthood, although not explicitly focusing on men, have shown that the consequences are not necessarily uniform across life domains (Dykstra and Wagner, 2007; Kendig *et al.*, 2007; Wenger *et al.*, 2007), we take four different life domains into consideration; namely social activities, health, economic activities, and psychological well-being. As a result, we hope to identify when

childlessness matters for men's life outcomes and when it does not. Our analyses are based on data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS), a nationally representative survey, conducted in 2002–2004, from which we selected 1,451 men aged 40 up to 59.

## Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

### The Structuring Influence of Fatherhood

The transition to parenthood is one of the most significant role transitions in the life course of an individual (Clausen, 1986; Feeney *et al.*, 2001). Parenthood is a key organizer of the life course (Hagestad and Call, 2007). There are normative expectations for how parents should act and behave, and many of these are laid down in laws (Dykstra and Hagestad, 2007a,b). Parenthood introduces new opportunities and simultaneously restricts engagement in specific life domains (Elder, 1985; Hagestad, 1990). We pose that the structuring influence of fatherhood in men's lives can be captured by five mechanisms.

First of all, the fulfillment of the role of father takes time. Children create substantial demands on parents' time (Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2003). The limits on time imply that fathers spend less time on activities beyond childrearing than do childless men. We refer to the mechanism as *the organization of time*. Not all activities are equally affected by the reduction in free-available time. Fatherhood creates new and enhances existing ties to individuals, and facilitates social activities that revolve around children. Parents often make new acquaintances through their children, as these create common grounds for the interaction between their parents and other adults (Eggebeen and Knoester, 2001). This is the second mechanism, which we call *quantity of social engagement opportunities*. Third, we pose that fatherhood *orders men's priorities*. Fatherhood shapes men's lives by confronting them with opportunities to sort out what is important to them in life (Snarey, 1993). Fatherhood makes goals in life important that transcend the individual self (Barnett, Marshall, and Pleck, 1992; Furstenberg, 2005; Dykstra, 2006). We therefore argue that fatherhood makes men prioritize relationships, and activities that benefit their children. Fourth, fatherhood shapes men's lives via *social control*, as the role of father entails certain obligations. By law, parents must not only provide their children with the essentials of daily living such as food and shelter,

but also provide socialization for their children's future adult lives (Dykstra and Hagestad, 2007a). There are socially shared expectations about proper behaviour of fathers. We therefore argue that fatherhood pressures men to set a proper example for their children (Umberson, 1987). The final mechanism concerns *sources of daily stress/joy*. One view is that parents are subject to problems in their lives that the childless do not have, such as worries, responsibilities and daily strains of having children (McLanahan and Adams, 1987; Pillemer and Sutor, 1991; Koropecj-Cox, 2002). The opposing view is that parenthood is a unique source of pleasure. Life course theory suggests that occupying the normatively expected social status of parenthood creates a sense of meaning and fulfillment. Furthermore, parents enjoy benefits that the childless do not have, such as the joy of seeing children grow up, personal growth, and the opportunity for nurturance.

The above-mentioned mechanisms are not mutually exclusive. Neither are they specific to a specific life outcome. In what follows, we focus on social activities (i.e. personal leisure, contact with parents, contact with neighbours, and community involvement), health, economic activities (i.e. income and work hours), and psychological well-being (i.e. life satisfaction and daily mood), and describe the ways in which they might be subject to the structuring influence of parenthood. Note that our theoretical framework assumes that fatherhood creates changes in men's lives. Of course, men who become fathers might be a distinct group from the start. We return to the issue of causation in the conclusion.

The five mechanisms underlying the structuring influence of fatherhood mostly pertain to differences between childless men and resident fathers. We therefore expect that childless men mostly, or only, differ from resident fathers and that there will be no, or only small differences between childless men and non-resident fathers. We take this into account when formulating our hypotheses below.

#### Social activities

Guided by the organization of time, the quantity of social engagement opportunities and the ordering of priorities perspectives, we argue that permanent childlessness is associated with a strong involvement in personal leisure activities and a weak involvement with family members, neighbours and the community. As children create substantial demands on parents' time (Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2003), we argue that having children restricts time for leisure activities, especially activities that do not revolve around children, such as

going out with friends, or going out in the evening. Conversely, we argue that having children expands activities that revolve around children: contact with family members, neighbours and community involvement. Children facilitate contact with family members (Gallagher and Gerstel, 2001), and fathers are likely to invest in family contacts so their children can benefit from childcare and support. In the neighbourhood, children connect their parents to other parents via the contacts with playmates (Furstenberg, 2005). Fathers are also likely to be involved in the community, as such engagement benefits their children by securing safe living environments and the availability of youth facilities (Dykstra and Hagestad, 2007b). The above leads to the following hypothesis: 'In comparison to resident fathers, childless men are more involved in personal leisure activities, but less involved with their family members, neighbours and in their community. In comparison to non-resident fathers, childless men are not more or only slightly more involved in personal leisure activities, and not less or only slightly less involved with their family members, with neighbours and in their community.'

#### Health

Guided by both the ordering of priorities perspective and the level of social control perspective, we argue that permanent childlessness is associated with poor health. The rationale is that fathers have healthier lives than childless men, because they are motivated to provide their children a good future (Christiansen and Palkovitz, 2001). Fathers are also expected to set a proper example for their children. Fatherhood is therefore seen to 'civilize' men by reducing their involvement in unhealthy behaviour (Akerlof, 1998). This leads to the following hypotheses: 'In comparison to resident fathers, childless men are less healthy. In comparison to non-resident fathers, childless men are not or only slightly less healthy.'

#### Economic activities

From the organization of time, the ordering of priorities and the level of social control perspectives, opposing views can be derived for the impact of permanent childlessness on men's work hours and level of income. Based on the time perspective, childless men are likely to spend more time on work in comparison to fathers. Based on the social control perspective, childless men are expected to exhibit a weaker commitment to their work and earn less money in comparison to fathers. The rationale is that society expects fathers to be good providers for their children.

From the ordering of priorities perspective, two expectations can be derived concerning men's level of income and work hours. The first is based on the good provider role and poses that fatherhood tends to increase men's level of income and their work effort. The rationale is that when men assume responsibility for providing economically for their families, the increased costs of supporting children should lead fathers to work more than childless men (Kaufman and Uhlenberg, 2000). The second concerns responsible fatherhood and states that becoming a father motivates men to reduce the number of hours they work outside the home. The rationale is that men will spend less time on work because they want to be involved in nurturing and rearing their children (Kaufman and Uhlenberg, 2000). Previous research has consistently shown, however, that fathers have higher incomes and work more hours a week in comparison to childless men (Ellingseter, 1990; Eggebeen and Knoester, 2001; Bielenksi, Bosch, and Wagner, 2002; Lundberg and Rose, 2002). The above leads to the following hypothesis: 'In comparison to resident fathers, childless men earn less money and work fewer hours a week. In comparison to non-resident fathers, childless men do not or earn only slightly less money and do not work less or only work slightly fewer hours a week.'

### Psychological well-being

Guided by the organization of time perspective we argue that childless men have higher levels of well-being in comparison to fathers, because the latter experience a reduction in personal and couple leisure time, which influences their well-being negatively [see for a review (Demo and Cox, 2000)]. Guided by the sources of stress/joy perspective, we argue that childlessness has both advantages and disadvantages for men's well-being. We expect that the relevance of these mechanisms, and the balance of joy versus stress, depends upon the outcome under study. Scholars have argued that the assessment of individuals' psychological well-being involves both a cognitive overall evaluation and some degree of daily positive and/or negative feeling (Pavot and Diener, 1993; Crooker and Near, 1998). Therefore, we use two separate measures of well-being in our analyses, namely overall satisfaction with life and daily mood. Taking the above into consideration, we expect that having children has a positive impact on men's satisfaction with life and a negative impact on their daily mood. The rationale is that fathers may feel that their daily lives have become more stressful and that they have restricted time for personal and couple leisure. Simultaneously, in the

long run, fathers may feel they have personally grown and see their lives as fulfilled by having children. This leads to the following hypothesis: 'In comparison to resident fathers, childless men have lower levels of life satisfaction, but higher levels of daily mood. In comparison to non-resident fathers, childless men do not have lower or only have slightly lower levels of life satisfaction and do not have higher or only have slightly higher levels of daily mood.'

### Partnership History

Given that many of the transitions into and out of (resident) fatherhood are related to starting and ending romantic relationships, partnership history rather than parental status may be responsible for differences between childless men and fathers. Empirical research supports this claim. First, numerous studies have shown that men who have a partner and men who are married are most likely to enter fatherhood (see for example Knoester and Eggebeen, 2006), whereas relationship break-ups at key points in adulthood are likely a precursor to a childless life (Latten and Kreijen, 2001; Keizer, Dykstra, and Jansen, 2008). Second, previous studies have uniformly shown that partnership history is related to men's behaviour and well-being. Cohabiting men and especially married men have more contacts with their family (Eggebeen, 2005), are more strongly attached to the labour force (Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel, 1990) and have higher levels of physical health and psychological well-being (Coombs, 1991; Waite, 1995; Akerlof, 1998; Brown, 2000; Brown, Bulanda, and Lee, 2005; Woo and Raley, 2005). Furthermore, experiencing dissolution of a partnership is related to men's psychological, social, health, and economic activities and well-being as well; divorced men have less contact with their family (Gerstel, 1988), exhibit less healthy behaviour (Williams and Umberson, 2004), are less committed to their occupational careers (Kalmijn, 2005), and are more distressed (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1990; Booth and Amato, 1991). To find out whether differences between childless men and fathers are attributable to partnership history, we explicitly take partnership history into account in our analyses.

## Method

### Data Source

Data from the public release file of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS) have been used. The NKPS is a large scale panel survey on family ties,



conducted between 2002 and 2004 among a representative sample of adults aged 18–79 residing in private households in the Netherlands (Dykstra *et al.*, 2005). The data were collected by means of computer assisted personal interviews supplemented with self-completion questionnaires. The overall response rate was 45 per cent, which is lower than in comparable surveys in other Western countries, but similar to comparable large-scale family surveys in the Netherlands (De Leeuw and De Heer, 2001; Dykstra *et al.*, 2005). The Dutch appear to be particularly sensitive about privacy issues. In addition to the face-to-face interviews, respondents filled in self-completion questionnaires with items pertaining to attitudes and other subjective measures: 92 per cent of the self-completion questionnaires were returned.

For the present analyses, we restricted the sample to men aged 40 up to 59. We chose to omit individuals under the age of 40 at the time of the interview because their childlessness status is not likely to be permanent. Dutch, American, and Australian research showed that the likelihood of having a first child at age 40 and over is very small (Landry and Darroch Forrest, 1995; Garssen *et al.*, 2001; Parr, 2005). Analyses using NKPS data confirm this finding: the majority of fathers (97.0 per cent) had their first child before the age of 40. Men who had their first child beyond the age of 40 were excluded from the analyses. We chose to omit respondents who were older than 59 because there is little variation in parental status among them; few still have children living at home. Given our interest in distinguishing fatherhood and fathering, we decided to only focus on middle-aged men. The age restrictions and the non-response for the self-completion questionnaires left us with a total of 1,451 respondents.

## Measures

### Parental status: focus on biological childlessness

In this article, childlessness is defined as never having had children (neither biological, step nor adoptive children). Although the impact of having children is not restricted to biological ties to children, but may also apply to having social ties to children, in this article we only focus on the impact of biological childlessness. Reasons for this choice are the very low numbers of stepchildren and adopted children in our dataset. Of the entire group of men aged 40–59, 0.8 per cent were living with adopted children, and 2.2 per cent were living with step-children (weighted percentages). A reason for this low proportion of respondents with stepchildren is demographic reality: divorce rates in the Netherlands are not as high as they are in the

United Kingdom or in the Scandinavian countries, for example. Another reason concerns the way in which questions about stepchildren were phrased. Respondents were requested to report only those stepchildren with whom they were currently living or with whom they had lived in the past. Stepchildren who had never co-resided with the respondent were not listed. Due to the low numbers, men who had no children of their own (i.e. no biological or adoptive children) but were living with step-children ( $N=6$ ) were also excluded from the analyses. Finally, men who outlived their children ( $N=4$ ) were excluded from the analyses.

In our sample of 1,451 men, 330 men (23 per cent) are childless. Men with biological children were categorized as resident father when one or more of their biological children were living in the parental home ( $n=712$ ; 49 per cent). They were categorized as non-resident fathers when their children did not live with them ( $n=409$ ; 28 per cent).

### Partnership history

To find out whether differences between childless men and fathers are attributable to having (had) a partner, rather than to having children, we explicitly take partnership history into account. We created two separate variables for men's partnership history. The first is current partner status; we differentiated between: (i) currently not partnered,  $n=380$  (ii) currently cohabiting,  $n=117$ , and (iii) currently married,  $n=954$ . In our sample, 16 men have a partner, but do not live with that person (1 per cent of our sample). We excluded them from our analyses.

We separate currently cohabiting from currently married, as scholars have suggested that cohabitation is more an alternative to being single than a precursor to being married; cohabitation, in comparison to marriage, is less strongly associated with having children and less strongly associated with our outcome variables such as contact with family members (Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel, 1990; Axinn and Thornton, 1992; Smock, 2000).

The second variable indicates whether the respondent has ever experienced a divorce in the past. The rationale for a separate variable for divorce is that we pose that having experienced a divorce may have an impact on men's lives that can still be felt when a new partner is found. Moreover, previous research has suggested that relationship break-ups at key points in adulthood are likely a precursor to a childless life (Latten and Kreijen, 2001; Keizer, Dykstra, and Jansen, 2008). Both a legal divorce as well as dissolution of a non-marital cohabiting relationship is considered a

divorce. 984 respondents have never experienced a divorce, whereas 467 have ever separated. Of this latter group, 313 have experienced a legal divorce (66 per cent).

### Dependent variables

*Personal leisure* is measured by a four-item scale. The respondents were asked whether they (i) had participated in sports, (ii) had participated in cultural activities, such as theatre, concert or museum, (iii) had gone to a restaurant, café, movie or party and (iv) had gone on an outdoor outing, cycle, hike in the past 12 months. Answers range from 4 = *not at all* up to 16 = *12 times or more*. Cronbach's alpha is 0.62. *Contact with parents*. We chose to use the measure of contact with parents as indicator of contact with family members. Contact with parents is delineated from two separate questions on how often the respondents had seen their mother and father in the last 12 months. Responses range from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *daily*. When both parents are alive, we averaged both scores. When only one parent is alive, contact with this parent is used for our analyses. For this outcome only, we excluded respondents whose parents were both no longer alive ( $n=517$ ). We also controlled for geographical distance between the respondent and the parents. *Contact with neighbours*. Information on contact with one's neighbours is assessed via the question: 'Did you visit neighbours and/or have neighbours visited you in the past 12 months? If so, how often?' Answer categories ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 4 = *12 times or more*. *Community involvement* is measured by a two-item scale. Respondents were asked whether they had engaged in (i) 'volunteer work for association, church or other organization (not school)' and (ii) 'providing unpaid help to sick or handicapped acquaintances or neighbours (not family)' in the past twelve months. Answers ranged from 2 = *not at all* up to 8 = *12 times or more*. Cronbach's alpha is 0.24. Even though we recognize that the alpha-value is low, we argue that it is justified to use this measure of community involvement for two reasons. First, alpha is meant for scales with interchangeable items (Nijdam, 2003), and volunteer work for an association and volunteer work for individuals are not intended to be interchangeable. Rather, they represent different types of community involvement. Second, the variable is constructed of only two items, making it more difficult to reach high alpha-values. *Physical health*. Information is provided by means of men's self-rated health, which is assessed via the question: 'How is your health in general?' Answer categories range from 1 = *least good* to 5 = *excellent*. *Monthly personal income*. Information

about personal income is delineated via the questions: 'What is your net monthly income from employment?' The scores on this question were categorized into quintiles. *Work hours*. Information on work hours is delineated via the question: 'How many hours a week on average do you actually work? That is to say, actual hours worked'. When a respondent has several jobs, the numbers of hours of these jobs were added up. Respondents who currently do not have a job, are assigned 0 hours of work ( $n=236$ ).

*Life satisfaction* is measured by the Diener's Life satisfaction scale (Diener *et al.*, 1985), with scores ranging from 4 = *least satisfied with life* up to 20 = *most satisfied with life*. Examples of scale items are: 'My life is ideal in most respects' and 'If I could live my life again, I would change very little'. Cronbach's alpha is 0.83. *Daily mood* is measured by the five-item Mental Health Index (Berwick *et al.*, 1991) with scores ranging from 5 = *lowest* up to 30 = *highest*. Examples of scale items are: 'How often have you felt particularly downhearted and miserable in the past 4 weeks?' and 'How often have you felt happy in the past 4 weeks?' Cronbach's alpha is 0.86.

### Control variables

Differences between childless men and fathers might actually be based on selection, that is, that childless men differ in fundamental ways from fathers, even before the latter have children. The rationale is that childless men are not selected into fatherhood because they have less desirable traits. For example, men with poor socioeconomic prospects are less likely to become husbands and fathers than men with good provider potential (Bernard, 1972; Becker, 1991). Given the cross-sectional nature of our research-design, we cannot find out whether selection plays a role. However, we introduced the level of education as a control in our analyses, to correct for possible confounding effects of pre-existing differences in socioeconomic potential between childless men and fathers. Respondents were asked about the highest level of education that they pursued. Answers ranged from 1 = *did not complete elementary school* to 10 = *post-graduate*.

Second, research has consistently shown that work roles are important for men's identity, their social ties and their psychological health, see for example (Warin *et al.*, 1999; Hatten *et al.*, 2002). Therefore, we included men's employment status, that is a dummy variable indicating whether or not someone is currently employed, as a control variable in our analyses, with the exception of the analysis of work hours.

Third, one's physical state is found to have a strong impact on people's social activities, people's work behaviour and their psychological well-being (Mastekaasa, 1996; Biddle, Fox, and Boutcher, 2000). Therefore, we also control for physical health in our analyses.

Fourth, as research has shown that age has an impact on the life outcomes studied, for example, that contact with family members and neighbours vary with age (Hagestad and de Jong Gierveld, 2006), we introduce age as a control in our analyses. Age was measured in years.

Means and standard deviations for our dependent variables and control variables are shown in Table 1.

## Analyses

### Preliminary Analyses

To reveal associations between parental status and partnership history, we ran preliminary analyses. These analyses (not shown) revealed that two-thirds of childless men do not have a partner, compared to nearly a third of the non-resident fathers, and less than a tenth of resident fathers. The percentages of cohabitation are more similar; 10 per cent of childless men, 6 per cent of non-resident fathers and 8 per cent of resident fathers currently cohabit. Whereas only a quarter of childless men are married, almost two-thirds of the non-resident fathers and a clear majority of resident fathers are married. Finally, two-fifths of childless men and non-resident fathers have ever divorced compared to less than a quarter of all resident fathers.

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics ( $N = 1,451$ )

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Personal leisure	11.08	2.8	4–16
Parent contact	4.27	1.3	1–7
Neighbours contact	2.47	1.0	1–4
Community involvement	3.30	1.5	2–8
Physical health	4.03	0.8	1–5
Income <sup>a</sup>	3.01	1.4	1–5
Work hours	35.01	18.3	0–80
Psychological mood	24.30	3.8	5–30
Satisfaction with life	14.45	2.8	4–20
Education	6.26	2.4	1–10
Employment status	0.84	0.4	0–1
Age	49.12	5.6	40–59

<sup>a</sup>Income 1 = 0–1,243; 2 = 1,243–1,650; 3 = 1,650–2,100; 4 = 2,100–2,700; and 5 = >2,700 Euro a month.

## Primary Analyses

We estimated two models for each outcome: One with our control variables and parental status; and another which also included indicators for partnership history. We added partnership history in a separate step to identify whether partnership history accounts for observed parental status differences. Seemingly unrelated estimation was used to examine whether the change in the size of the parental status coefficients between Model 1 and Model 2 was significant. Tables 2–4 show the results for social activities, health and economic activities, and psychological well-being respectively.

## Results

The results in Model 1 of Table 2 show that, contrary to our expectations, childless men do not differ from fathers with respect to personal leisure. Men's level of education, and to a lesser extent, their employment status and health are better predictors of men's participation in personal leisure activities than parental status. The addition of men's partnership history in Model 2 does not lead to a significant improvement of the model fit.

We expected childless men to have less frequent contact with their parents in comparison to fathers, in particular resident fathers. Model 1 shows that childless men do not differ from fathers. The addition of men's partnership history in Model 2 does not lead to an improvement of the model fit. Distance to one's parents and, to a lesser extent, health and educational attainment, are better predictors of contact with one's parents than parental status.

Looking at Model 1 of the third set of columns, we find that parental status contributes to the explanation of contact with neighbours. Childless men have significantly less frequent contact with their neighbours in comparison to resident fathers. Childless men do not significantly differ from non-resident fathers. The addition of men's partnership history in Model 2 leads to a significant improvement of the model fit. Men who are currently unpartnered have significantly less contact with their neighbours in comparison to currently married men. The inclusion of men's partnerships history significantly reduces the effects of being a resident father to insignificance. Our findings suggest that the reason that childless men have less contact with their neighbours in comparison to resident fathers is that they are more often unpartnered.



**Table 2** Hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting men's social activities ( $N = 1,451$ )

	Personal leisure		Contact parent		Neighbours' contact		Community involvement	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Resident father	0.002	-0.024	-0.022	0.012	0.096***	0.005	0.119***	0.083*
Non-resident father	0.016	0.002	-0.063	-0.042	0.013	-0.022	0.075*	0.071
(vs. Permanently childless men)								
Age	-0.028	0.027	0.037	0.037	0.082**	0.059*	0.077**	0.053
Education	0.348***	0.343***	-0.068*	-0.065*	0.081**	0.072**	0.105***	0.106***
Employment status	0.062*	0.059*	-0.047	-0.047	0.001	-0.008	-0.056	-0.059
Health	0.171***	0.168***	0.142***	0.142***	0.019	0.005	0.009	0.044
Distance			-0.455***	-0.451***				
Currently not partnered	-0.050*		0.074	0.009	-0.132***	-0.020		-0.031
Currently cohabiting	0.042							-0.072*
(vs. Currently married)								
Ever separated (vs. Never separated)								
Adj. $R^2$	0.193	0.020	-0.068*	-0.068*	0.014	-0.024	0.025	-0.071*
$\Delta F$	52.0***	0.195	0.224	0.225	4.5***	0.027	6.3***	0.035
		2.2	33.7***	1.4		7.2***		5.5***

\*  $P < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $P < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $P < 0.001$ .

In line with our expectations, Model 1 of the fourth set of columns shows that non-resident fathers and especially resident fathers are more engaged in their community in comparison to childless men. The addition of men's partnership history in Model 2 leads to a significant improvement of the model fit. In comparison to men who are currently married, men who are currently cohabiting are less involved in their community. Men who have ever experienced the dissolution of a partnership are less involved in their community than the never separated. With the inclusion of partnership history, the effect of being a non-resident father is reduced to insignificance, but the drop in effect size is not significant. The magnitude of the coefficient of being a resident father decreases strongly, but remains significant. The drop in effect size is significant. Controlled for age, education, employment status, health, and partnership history, childless men are less involved in their community in comparison to resident fathers.

Model 1 of Table 3 shows that childless men report lower levels of health in comparison to resident fathers, which is consistent with our expectations. Childless men do not significantly differ from non-resident fathers. The latter finding is contrary to our expectations. Noteworthy, men's educational attainment and especially men's health have more predictive power than parental status. The addition of men's partnership history in Model 2 leads to a significant improvement of the model fit. Ever having experienced the dissolution of a partnership and especially currently not being partnered are associated with lower levels of health. The inclusion of men's partnership history reduces the effect of being a resident father to insignificance and this drop in effect size is significant. Overall, our findings suggest that the reason why childless men have poorer health than resident fathers is that they are more often unpartnered and that they have more often experienced the dissolution of a partnership.

Confirming our expectations, the second set of columns in Table 3 shows that childless men report lower levels of *income* in comparison to fathers. Both resident and non-resident fathers have significantly higher levels of income in comparison to childless men. Noteworthy, men's educational attainment and men's employment status are more strongly associated with men's level of income than parental status. The addition of men's partnership history leads to a significant improvement of the model fit. Currently cohabiting and especially currently not having a partner are associated with lower levels of income. With the inclusion of partnership history, the effect of

**Table 3** Hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting men's health and economic activities ( $N = 1,451$ )

	Physical health		Income		Work hours	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Resident father	0.062*	−0.011	0.155***	0.082**	0.125***	0.062
Non-resident father (vs. Permanently childless men)	0.012	−0.007	0.185***	0.156***	0.098***	0.076**
Age	−0.022	−0.040	0.075**	0.052*	−0.135***	−0.152***
Education	0.134***	0.123***	0.338***	0.334***	0.121***	0.114***
Employment status	0.318***	0.306***	0.359***	0.353***	—	—
Health			0.071**	0.062**	0.290***	0.277***
Currently not partnered		−0.083**		−0.104***		−0.085*
Currently cohabiting (vs. Currently married)		−0.005		−0.064**		−0.019
Ever separated (vs. Never separated)		−0.048*		−0.023		−0.036
Adj. $R^2$			0.346	0.354	0.150	0.156
$\Delta F$			123.0***	6.7***	52.3***	4.8**

\* $P < 0.05$ ; \*\* $P < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ .**Table 4** Hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting men's well-being ( $N = 1,451$ )

	Life satisfaction		Psychological mood	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Resident father	0.095**	−0.087*	0.076**	−0.018
Non-resident father (vs. Permanently childless men)	0.035	−0.032	0.039	0.013
Age	0.066*	0.022	0.124**	0.095***
Education	−0.018	−0.038	0.020	0.010
Employment status	0.080**	0.059*	0.073**	0.061*
Health	0.268***	0.258***	0.322***	0.305***
Currently not partnered		−0.260***		−0.121***
Currently cohabiting (vs. Currently married)		−0.013		−0.012
Ever separated (vs. Never separated)		−0.064*		−0.082***
Adj. $R^2$	0.107	0.167	137	158
$\Delta F$	30.1***	35.7***	39.4***	13.5***

\* $P < 0.05$ ; \*\* $P < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ .

being a resident father diminishes, but remains significant, which indicates that having children remains a powerful predictor of income even when partnership history is controlled for.

Turning to work hours, the last set of columns in Table 3, results show that, in line with our expectations, childless men work significantly fewer hours a week than fathers. Both resident and non-resident fathers have longer work weeks in comparison to childless men. Noteworthy, health and age are better predictors of how many hours men work than parental status. As the Model 2 results show, unpartnered men work fewer hours than married men. The inclusion of partnership history reduces the effect of being a

resident father to insignificance, and this drop in effect size is significant. Furthermore, the effect of being a non-resident father decreases, but remains significant. When age, educational attainment, health, and partnership history are controlled for, only the difference between childless men and non-resident fathers remains significant.

Consistent with expectations, the findings in Model 1 of Table 4 show that childless men have lower levels of life satisfaction in comparison to resident fathers. The life satisfaction of childless men is not significantly different from that of non-resident fathers, which is contrary to expectations. Noteworthy, men's health has more predictive power than parental status.

The inclusion of men's partnership history in Model 2 changes the results drastically. Men who have ever separated and men who are currently not partnered are less satisfied with their lives. Noteworthy, with the inclusion of men's partnership history, the coefficient for being a resident father becomes negative rather than positive. This change in effect size is significant. Resident fathers are only advantaged because they are more likely to be partnered in comparison to childless men. Contrary to our expectations, when controlled for age, educational attainment, employment status, health, and partnership history, childless men are more satisfied with their lives in comparison to resident fathers.

Turning to the last set of columns in Table 4, our findings in Model 1 show that childless men have lower levels of daily mood in comparison to resident fathers only. These results change when men's partnership history is included in Model 2. Men who are currently not partnered and men who have ever separated have significantly lower levels of daily mood. With the inclusion of men's partnership history, the effect of being a resident father is reduced to insignificance and this drop in effect size is significant. Men's health and to a lesser extent their age are better predictors of men's psychological mood than parental status. Overall, our findings suggest that the reason why childless men have lower levels of daily mood in comparison to resident fathers is that they are more often unpartnered and more often have experienced the dissolution of a partnership.

## Discussion

### Conclusions and Implications

Our analyses contribute to the developing literature on the impact of permanent childlessness on men's lives. We show that remaining without children makes a difference, albeit small, in the lives of middle-aged men. In line with prior research (Umberson and Gove, 1989; Dykstra and Hagestad, 2007b), we find that the implications of childlessness are not uniform across all life domains. Our results also show that to find out how fatherhood matters in men's lives, it is important to distinguish the status of being a father from the active involvement with children.

Parenthood differences are most prominent in the economic domain. Childless men have lower levels of income in comparison to both resident and non-resident fathers. The finding underscores the good-provider role of men who have become fathers. Lundberg and Rose (2002) have described the higher

wage rates of men who become fathers as a 'fatherhood premium'. As other scholars have shown (Christiansen and Palkovitz, 2001), most fathers view being a provider as the most important role in life and the most important function they can fulfill for their children.

Regarding work hours, we find that only non-resident fathers work more hours than childless men, and that the length of the work week does not differ between resident fathers and childless men. Although it is suggested in the literature that a transition from traditional fatherhood to responsible fathering is slowly taking place [see for example (Hobson, 2002; Brannen and Nilsen, 2006)], we find no support for the responsible fathering hypothesis (Doherty *et al.*, 1998), which holds that fathers spend less time on work because they want to be involved in nurturing and rearing their children. Our study shows no difference in workweek length between childless men and resident fathers. The absence of support for the responsible fathering hypothesis might be a cohort effect. Active involvement in childcare is a relative recent model of paternal involvement (Christiansen and Palkovitz, 2001). Men in older cohorts are more likely to be traditional fathers; those who assume responsibility for providing economically for their families and therefore spend much time on work. It is conceivable that future cohorts of middle-aged men will show a larger proportion of fathers in part-time employment.

Previous research has consistently shown that permanent childlessness is associated with strong socio-economic positions for women, especially the never married (Dykstra and Hagestad, 2007a). Our findings show an opposite pattern for men; those with children have stronger economic positions than those who have remained childless. In our society, the gender-based division of tasks leads to greater restrictions on combining work and childcare responsibilities for women than men (Wetzels, 2001; Hakim, 2003; Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; Schippers, 2003). Women, rather than men, encounter the opportunity costs of having children. Childless women can more easily invest in their occupational career than mothers. Furthermore, a strong focus on one's occupational career also makes it less likely that women enter parenthood (Keizer, Dykstra, and Jansen, 2008).

In contemplating the findings, we feel that specifics of Dutch society should be noted. The Netherlands has the highest share of part-time workers of all European countries (Eurostat, 2006); about 23 per cent of Dutch men work part-time in comparison to an EU-average of almost 8 per cent. In the Netherlands,

working part-time may be seen as a more viable option for men than in other European countries. It may especially be a nice option for childless men, leaving time open for leisure as they do not have to provide for any children. Additional analyses on our data confirm this; childless men are more likely to work part-time in comparison to resident and non-resident fathers.

Differences between childless men and fathers are less prominent in other life domains than the economic. Regarding social activities, we find parenthood differences for community involvement, but not for leisure and contacts with family and neighbours. High levels of community involvement emerge for resident fathers only, suggesting that the presence of children at home motivates men to participate in activities that serve the local good. Of course, resident children might also serve as 'connectors' (Gallagher and Gerstel, 2001) here, linking their fathers to local networks. In the psychological domain our results show that the childless are advantaged. Childless men are more satisfied with their lives than resident fathers, a finding in line with recent American work (Knoester and Eggebeen, 2006).

Importantly, our work reveals that differences between childless men and fathers are often attributable to partnership history. For example, we demonstrated that childless men report lower levels of health because they are more often unpartnered, and not because they have not made the transition to fatherhood. What at first glance appears to be the impact of fatherhood, turns out to be health benefits related to having a partner. As other scholars have suggested, having children may affect men's life outcomes foremost indirectly through increasing the probability of a current partnership (Kohler, Behrman, and Skytthe, 2005). Disentangling parental status and partnership status is essential to understanding why permanently childless men have different life outcomes in comparison to fathers.

This study started from the premise that an examination of the structuring influence of parenthood is a means to find out what it is about having children that matters for how well men fare. Given that few differences between childless men and fathers emerged, we conclude that men's lives are not strongly structured by parenthood. Nevertheless, the favourable economic position of fathers is evidence of life-course structuring in the sense of responsiveness to social control (the normative pressure to be a good provider) and the prioritization of activities that benefit offspring. The high level of community involvement observed for resident fathers is evidence of life-course

structuring in the sense that children provide opportunities for social engagement, and also that men are motivated to invest in activities that serve their children's interests. Our results indicate that many of the parenthood differences can be attributed to partner history. For that reason, our overall conclusion is that having children structures men's lives foremost indirectly through the benefits linked with having a partner. The economic domain seems to be the only domain in which childless men are disadvantaged in the long run.

## Limitations and Future Directions

Two limitations of our study should be noted. First, as discussed previously, we were unable to control for reversed causation and selection, given our cross-sectional design. As a result, inferences regarding the extent to which parental status causes differences in men's lives are tenuous. Favourable personal traits such as optimism and self-confidence make it more likely that men are healthier, more satisfied with their lives, and so forth (Scheier and Carver, 1992). Such traits also make men more likely to enter marriage and fatherhood (Botwin, Buss, and Shackelford, 1997). Some of our parental status differences might therefore be spurious effects. Being healthy, having good economic positions, and high life satisfaction are also factors that increase the likelihood that men become fathers and enter marriage (Mastekaasa, 1992; Stutzer and Frey, 2006). Our findings may therefore be attributable to reversed causation. Therefore, we cannot with full certainty state that fatherhood and childlessness cause men to behave in certain ways. Additional studies with longitudinal designs are needed to investigate how and to what extent men's life outcomes are shaped by permanent childlessness. However, regardless of whether the disadvantaged economic position of childless men is based on selection or causation, our findings suggest that parenthood status warrants greater attention in analyses of socio-economic inequality of middle aged men.

Second, we were not able to explore the impact of step-parenthood on men's lives, due to the low proportion of stepchildren in our data set. It would be interesting to find out whether the impact of childlessness depends on not having biological or social ties to children, especially now the prevalence of non-traditional families is rising (Stacey, 1990; Juby and Le Bourdais, 1998; Liefbroer, 1999; Rendall *et al.*, 2001; Dykstra, 2004). Future research that compares the impact of childlessness with the impact of step-parenthood would be a welcome addition to the literature.

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